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'Wild and dangerous' Student falls victim to power of the big lake

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By Melissa Slager
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND HAVEN -- A father held his smiling 4-year-old tight on the pier at Grand Haven State Park as the pair marveled at the Lake Michigan waves, some reaching 6 feet or more before bashing against the concrete and spraying them with mist.

"It's fun to enjoy the lake. ... Part of the reason it's so fun is because it's so wild and dangerous -- I love it," Dirk Pikaart said Sunday as his son, Derek, pointed at ducks bobbing near the shoreline.

"But you've got to be smart."

Police say the waters around the pier were "extremely dangerous" the night a promising student, Daniel Luke Reiss, and seven of his friends raced around the pier's lighthouse in the cold and

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The 19-year-old Grand Haven man -- a sophomore at Grand Valley State University -- is presumed drowned after he apparently got swept off the pier by a large wave late Saturday. Rescuers were called at 11:21 p.m., finding waves in the range of 6 to 15 feet, pushed by strong westerly winds. The water was 47 degrees, according to the National Weather Service.

"It's just young people do that -- they go out and wave hop. I've seen this many times over the years," said Mark Reiss, the victim's uncle and a Grand Haven police officer. "It's just a terrible accident. Nobody's fault and nobody to blame.

"They were just kids being kids and got caught up in something they couldn't get out of."

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Reiss was a bright and handsome young man who carried a 4.0 grade-point average at college and Grand Haven High School, where he graduated in 2002, his uncle said.

"He had college offers from MIT and West Point -- all kinds of major universities. But he stayed locally," Mark Reiss said.

"He was a real fun-loving kid," Grand Haven High School Principal Scott Grimes said today. "He had a real outgoing personality and a lot of friends."

Reiss was studying engineering and thinking of pursuing his pilot's license. GVSU's student newspaper shows he also had an interest in politics, helping organize rocker Ted Nugent's visit to campus last month as a member of College Republicans.

"He had the world to look forward to," his uncle said.

Mark Reiss said the young man's mother, Roseanne, and 15-year-old sister, Amanda, are in shock. His father, Michael, died in 1997.

Now, family are waiting at the same time they are grieving.

The same choppy waves that swept Reiss away also kept rescuers from getting into the water.

Police and the Coast Guard were re-evaluating the situation this morning, as windy conditions continued. "It's simply

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going to be dependent on the weather," Grand Haven police Lt. Rick Yonker said.

Friends lost sight of Reiss as they ran around the lighthouse, then heard him yelling for help and saw him in the water about 30 yards southeast of the pier head and about 10 to 15 feet out, police said. They tried to rescue him but were unsuccessful.

A 47-foot Coast Guard boat scoured the waters until 2:40 a.m. while a Coast Guard helicopter searched from the air until 3:15 a.m.

Rescue workers met again at 8 a.m. Sunday but determined Lake Michigan conditions still were too dangerous for a search.

"Hopefully we'll get a break in the weather and Tuesday is looking like it'll be OK or Wednesday. But the sooner the better," Mark Reiss said. "All we can really do is wait."

The drowning is the second in three months at Grand Haven State Park.

Divers in September located the body of Andrew Burton Fox, a Grand Haven High senior, ending a two-day lakeside vigil by family and friends. Fox drowned after he and a friend struggled to swim in rough water, with waves up to 5 feet.

That drownings "hit hard" for students at Grand Haven High School, Principal Grimes said today. "It's not unusual for them to hear the facts of how dangerous the pier is this time of year. That message is pretty prevalent around here."

In 1996, the district's community relations department, in coordination with the U.S. Coast Guard and Army Corps of Engineers, produced the video "Pier Safety: A Matter of Life and Death." The 26-minute video is filled with images of powerful waves washing over the piers.

Officials have contemplated a second video that may include information about rip currents and other water hazards.

The video was produced as part of a Pier Safety Week, when a permanent granite memorial was erected to those lost off the Grand Haven piers and the people who tried to rescue them.

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